

Part 3. The early Wegg Years

In Summer 1974 as the IMA Executive were searching for a new conductor, news came of a 23 year-old final year student of the Ottawa Music Faculty. James Wegg, principal clarinet with the Ottawa Civic Symphony, and founder-conductor of the new Nepean (Summer) Symphony was looking for an orchestra to conduct during the winter, and was willing to drive to Deep River weekly to lead rehearsals. Jim seemed amiable and very competent and thus a fruitful 16-season relationship began.

For the 1974-5 season there were only two orchestral concerts under Jim's baton. The December concert featured Allan Behan in Beethoven's Piano Concerto No.3. Allan was just one of Jim's nine musical friends who came up from Ottawa to add resonance to the IMA. The Deep River players soon adapted to



James Wegg

the professional approach of their young maestro, although both parties had a little initial difficulty in communicating the tempo of, of all things, a waltz, from *Der Rosenkavalier*. By the time the Spring Concert came round, including a viola concerto played by the NACO's Janos Csaba, Argus, in the NRT, was able to report a noticeable improvement in the musicality and ensemble playing of the orchestra. The remainder of the series was filled out by a visit from the NACO and

two soirees. Wegg's youthful energy provided a strong contribution to the spring soiree, both as conductor for a Bach Double Violin concerto, and as player in a set of Scott Joplin rags. With support from the IMA, he brought his jazz group "The Muskrat Ramblers" to Deep River in April as a fundraiser for the Swimming Pool Committee, and when summer came, we had the Nepean Symphony playing in the Childs Auditorium in July.

Jim's second season, 1975-6, proved just as hectic for the core members of the orchestra, because of the community production of "Fiddler on the Roof" in the Fall, for which Jim undertook the responsibility of music director. The December Symphony concert featured AECL nuclear physicist Otto Haeusser as soloist in the Haydn Cello concerto in D, and the orchestra was put on its toes playing a Hindemith suite and the Mendelssohn Symphony No. 1, a challenge for the strings.

The soiree in February introduced Cynthia Steljes, a 15-year-old from Mackenzie High School playing a Vivaldi oboe sonata. Of all the young players who have made their beginning in the Deep River Symphony, Cynthia has probably had the

most successful subsequent career in music, starring as a founder member of the renowned Quartetto Gelato. For the April Symphony concert, Jim recruited his Nepean concertmaster, Igor Szwec, to provide the solo violin for the Bruch concerto, and in the words of a skeptical publicity officer, the Orchestra “attempted” the Dvorak Seventh Symphony. Argus was not too impressed, possibly given license by the advance publicity. In this concert, a composition by the music director, entitled “The Mind” provided a short diversion. This season could tentatively be identified as the one in which the “IMA” began to take a back seat to the “DRSO” in the minds of both the audience and the players.

The new Childs Auditorium, opened in 1971, had proved disappointing to performers. The acoustics were so dead that it was difficult to hear colleagues clearly enough during a performance. Help was sought from the National Research Council, and with advice from the Building Division and the loan of test equipment from AECL, experimental measurements were carried out under the direction of John Fraser. Luckily a simple solution was able to be devised. The ceiling tiles were taken down and painted with several coats of finish to make the surface more sound-reflecting and a set of portable acoustically-reflecting baffles was fabricated to be placed behind performers and above the stage. The work was completed in time for the opening of the 1976-7 season. Science triumphed, the upgrade passed the proof test and the musicians were finally happy.

Wegg’s realization that he had an orchestra that was “wall-to-wall Ph.Ds” gave voice to a full page article on the DRSO in the Ottawa Citizen, contributed by Mary Fehrenbach. For 1976-7, Jim Wegg was determined to continue his policy of having the DRSO support other music makers in the area. The December concert featured the Deep River Choral Group in the Schubert Mass in E flat. Both female soloists were locally-grown, Cheryl Palmai and Jinty Smith, while the three male soloists were recruited in Ottawa by Jim. The February Pops concert involved the Deep River Ballet Club, and Cheryl Palmai again, singing arias from Viennese operetta. For the serious Spring Concert in April 1977 the DRSO was challenged by a program of major pieces, a Handel Concerto Grosso, the Schumann Piano Concerto and Beethoven’s Eroica Symphony. Andrew Tunis from Ottawa played the piano solo.



Cynthia Steljes

The next season, 1977-8, was the orchestra's 25th. The tympanist/past president, Jim Forster, and the orchestra were featured in a sizable article in the Toronto Star, and three weeks after an October visit by the Nepean Symphony, the DRSO celebrated its coming of age with a musical banquet at Forest Hall. The banquet speaker was Donald MacSween, CEO of the National Arts Centre, and the pre- and post-prandial entertainment was provided by orchestra members and a few friends from Ottawa. To commemorate the season further, a grant was obtained for a special commission for an original composition. This was awarded to Pierre Gallant, whose score did not arrive in time to be included in the current season. The celebration continued in November with a visit from the NACO, and finally in December, the DRSO got to play, in a program which included past-conductor David Ward in the Mozart Piano Concerto K.488, and a daring excursion into the music of Anton Bruckner, the Fourth "Romantic" symphony. Before the dress rehearsal on the night before the concert, the orchestra had a test drive in the form of a children's concert. Clarinetist Mel Berlie was the only player left from that first children's concert given so many years before under the baton of Alec Moore. The first concert of 1978, in February, was "A Night at the Opera" with Cheryl Palmi and the Choral Group. After the April concert, in which Cynthia Steljes and Bill Buyers appeared as soloists with Mary Wegg (formerly of Deep River) and Valerie Lidstone (Ottawa) in the Mozart Sinfonia Concertante, we heard that Jim Wegg was to go to Pittsburgh to learn to be a conductor – why? Anyhow the DRSO had once again to find another conductor.

After all the talk of wall-to-wall Ph.D's, the DRSO was lucky enough to get itself a new conductor with a D.Mus., for the 1978-9 season. Robert Ryker, who had played 15 years as Principal Tuba in the Montreal Symphony, and had conducted the Baltimore Symphony, the Cleveland and the London Sinfonia, was Community Musician and conductor of the Symphony in North Bay. The bus service between

North Bay and Deep River fit the DRSO and the Ryker schedules very well, so we had a new conductor. Ryker worked hard at increasing family audience involvement. Two children's concerts were scheduled – and rehearsed. Program



Robert Ryker

emphasis was on local soloists, for example Ring Gentner, Ian Aitchison and Valerie Selander in a Vivaldi Concerto Grosso, and Cynthia Steljes in the Swan

of Tuonela. There was a “real” Pops concert, with Offenbach, Sousa, Leroy Anderson and Pierre Gallant’s “Chanson Populaire” – finally completed – and we all loved Tchaikowski’s “Little Russian” Symphony, played in April. But the North Bay job ran out, and at the end of the season Ryker rode off westerly into the setting sun.

Lucky again, the DRSO, with a little help from the Ontario Federation of Symphony Orchestras, and a new appointment in North Bay, found Stephan Van Heerden to direct the Orchestra for the 1979-80 season. Stephan was living in Toronto, but found the courage to brave the weekly bus trip from the far south. Stephan was a late starter in music, and a refugee from South Africa, but he had excelled in his viola and conducting studies at the Toronto conservatory and was a pupil of Boyd Neel. Stephan was socially adaptable and musically confident, and fit in to the Deep River environment immediately. His first season followed Ryker’s pattern; three children’s concerts, easy listening and the use of local soloists, although a friend from Toronto, Mark Widner, was imported as soloist for the Chopin Piano Concerto No. 1 at the Spring Pops Concert. The first two concerts were dogged by problems. The Christmas concert was planned to end seasonally with the Hely-Hutchinson (another South African) Carol Symphony, but the music turned up very late and movements had to be cut because of inadequate practice time. Then Cheryl Palmal was struck down by ‘flu and was unable to sing at the Pops concert. The orchestra played “Peer Gynt” without Solveig’s voice! But all went well at the April Concert when Ring Gentner, Sally Winterbon, Otto Haeusser and the Orchestra turned in a performance of the Beethoven Triple concerto which Argus judged as “nearly perfect”.

Stephan’s second season brought Pembroke’s Kazimier Samujlo as soloist in the Hummel trumpet concerto, and the Deep River Ballet Club dancing in excerpts from the “Nutcracker” but the highlight was the production of Gilbert and Sullivan’s “HMS Pinafore” in February 1981, with the Pembroke Community Choir – Deep River’s first G&S for twenty years! The April Concert featured Adrienne Shannon from Toronto in the Grieg Piano concerto and Mozart’s Symphony No.40, and sadly, was Stephan’s last. The weekly traveling to North Bay and Deep River from Toronto had finally taken its toll. But rumours of the return of Wegg were on the wind.

The fourth and final part of these historical notes will be appear in the May 24 concert program

